

The Arizona Early Intervention Program Connecting with AzEIP

Natural Environments

Maureen Casey, a family representative on the ICC, contributed this article.

The Arizona Early Intervention Program—AzEIP—provides services and supports to infants and toddlers and their families when a child has a disability or is not reaching certain milestones. The family and their team decide the services and supports needed to support the family to care for that child. The law says that services and supports must be, “to the maximum extent appropriate...in **natural environments**, including the home, and community settings in which children without disabilities participate.”

Early Intervention services and supports are provided under a federal law, IDEA, (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act). The law says that the team, made up of the child’s parents, support or service coordinator, and people providing services to the child, must start with the idea that services are going to be in the natural environment. If the team believes that services cannot be in the natural environment, they must say why not and what they are doing to change that.

Congress wrote the law very strongly on this point. Families of children with disabilities told Congress to stop isolating children with disabilities from their communities. Before the law, children with disabilities did not attend regular schools; they did not do the same things other children were doing at the same age. By separating children in this way, children with disabilities did not learn



from their peers and their learning was further delayed. Typical children did not see children with delays or disabilities and did not learn that children with disabilities existed. Families who fought for the law said that while going to the grocery store with a child with cerebral palsy or autism might be difficult, it is important that families receive services to help them to do all of the things families want and need to do.

Families with children with delays or disabilities want to attend religious services; they want to go to the park, and to attend family and community events. Providers can help families to think about what challenges they might face doing these things and help them to think about what can be done to make these activities possible. Service providers can help families to practice: they may go with the family to the grocery store. Maybe the child needs support to sit in the shopping cart, or possibly the family needs ways to deal with the child’s challenging behaviors. Going to the grocery store can also be a time for learning for an infant or toddler. It can be a time to practice counting, name colors, and play matching games.

Your child’s natural environment can be your home; it may also be the park, the grocery store, the library, a restaurant. It is any place your family would normally be with your child, doing the things that all families do with their children, as they grow and learn.

This column is a collaboration between AzEIP, Raising Special Kids and Pilot Parents of Southern Arizona to benefit families of young children with disabilities in Arizona. If you have questions or suggestions for content, or if you would like information on council or committee meetings or to be on AzEIP’s mailing list, call Maxine Piper at AzEIP: (602) 532-9960 or (888) 439-5609 or email allazeip2@azdes.gov